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TAGS: PREL MOPS PINR ZI BC
SUBJECT: BOTSWANA: VP MERAFAH UNLOADS REGARDING ZIMBABWE

REF: GABORONE 973

Classified By: AMBASSADOR STEPHEN J. NOLAN; REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Botswana's Acting President Moputi Merafhe invited representatives from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France as well as the European Union to a meeting November 6. The Acting President briefed them on Botswana's plans for the November 9 SADC Extraordinary Summit in South Africa, shared his frustration at lack of progress in the Zimbabwe negotiations, and complained that the Government of Zimbabwe has falsely accused Botswana of training MDC supporters to destabilize the Mugabe regime. Neither Merafhe nor Foreign Minister Skelemani were optimistic that any progress will be made at the November 9 summit. On November 7, the GOB issued a press release to publicly deny that it has given military training to MDC supporters. The GOB says that it welcomes any observers (from Zimbabwe, SADC, or the international community) to inspect its facilities and look for signs of the alleged training. END SUMMARY.

Botswana's General Position on Zimbabwe

¶2. (C) Botswana's Acting President Moputi Merafhe summoned the representatives from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France as well as the European Union to a meeting at his office November 6. Merafhe (normally Botswana's Vice President, but acting as President while President Khama is abroad) was accompanied by Foreign Minister Phandu Skelemani. Merafhe explained that the purpose of the meeting was to update the Chiefs of Mission on Zimbabwe and to solicit ideas on how we could work together to move the situation forward.

¶3. (C) He emphasized that President Khama is strongly frustrated by the lack of progress in the power-sharing negotiations and by GOZ stonewalling and gameplaying. Khama believes that the talks have reached an impasse and the only way forward is to hold new, internationally supervised elections, as he indicated in his "State of the Nation" address November 3. Per Merafhe, the GOB realizes that this position may be viewed as provocative and it will be an uphill struggle to gain support for new elections, but the Government is firm in its resolve.

¶4. (C) Acting President Merafhe said that for the negotiations to be credible, Tsvangirai cannot be treated as a "junior partner" in a coalition government, and ZANU-PF intransigence on this point has impeded negotiations. Merafhe complained that SADC's continued deference to Mugabe as the "legitimate" leader of Zimbabwe despite his clear

abuse of power was hard to fathom. The Acting President also noted that the Zimbabwe crisis continues to have negative impacts on Botswana. He stated that the GOB has deployed hundreds of troops along the border both to control illegal migration and foot and mouth disease, which is said to be "rampant" in Zimbabwe. He claimed that Zimbabweans are responsible for rising crime in Botswana. Finally, he noted that with more than 1000 deaths and countless people injured or unaccounted for, Botswana has a moral responsibility to support an outcome in Zimbabwe that reflects the true will of the people.

"New Development": Accusations of Secret Training Program

¶ 15. (S) Acting President Merafhe told the diplomats that the Botswana Minister of Defense attended a meeting of the SADC Organ on Peace, Defense, and Security in Maputo November 5. The MOD was sent to the meeting to address Zimbabwean charges that the GOB has trained more than 2,500 "MDC cadres" since 2002 for the purpose of destabilizing the Mugabe regime. The GOZ also alleges that Botswana continues to train MDC youth in batches of 130. Merafhe said that this allegation was ridiculous and "a complete fabrication." (Note: Reftel describes reaction of FM Skelemani to these allegations and discusses the Maputo meeting. End Note.) Merafhe said that the GOB "categorically denies" this allegation and that if it is raised at the November 9 Extraordinary Summit, he plans to invite SADC to send a fact-finding team to look into the issue. He also said that the GOZ would be free to send a team and could "travel anywhere they wish." These allegations are especially troubling, said Merafhe, because Botswana and Zimbabwe have long had a Joint Permanent Commission on Defence and Security to discuss major bilateral issues, during which no such allegations have ever surfaced. (Note: Merafhe said that the VOA transmitting station in Selebi-Phikwe is sometimes raised at the bilateral commission. End Note.) The Acting President was unsure why Zimbabwe would choose to raise this allegation now, but he speculated that it was a clumsy attempt to divert attention from President Khama's call for new elections and to intimidate Botswana. More ominously, he said that he feared the story could be a pretext for the GOZ to "unleash a new wave of terror on the MDC."

The Way Forward?

¶ 16. (C) Merafhe asked the diplomats about their countries' current views of the situation and their minimum benchmarks for noting progress in Zimbabwe. Ambassador Nolan thanked Merafhe for Botswana's courageous stand and for their continuing support for our VOA operation. Though the USG supports SADC's efforts, we think it might be time to bring the African Union into the negotiations. The Ambassador noted that we were making this suggestion to Tanzanian President Kikwete. He reiterated that the USG is providing \$140 million in food and other humanitarian assistance to Zimbabwe, and that we are prepared to provide significant additional support should the power-sharing agreement be truly honored and MDC given a real share of power.

¶ 17. (C) The EU representative stressed that its current humanitarian assistance will continue, but any financial assistance package would be conditioned on evidence of real progress. Minimal benchmarks would be an inclusive government with credible MDC influence, progress on the rule of law and a return of respect for human rights. He went on to say that SADC credibility is at stake if Mugabe cannot be persuaded to honor the agreement, and that broadening engagement to include both the AU and UN may be necessary if there is no progress. The German, British and French representatives echoed these points.

¶ 18. (C) Vice President Merafhe responded that Mugabe is still viewed as a hero by many AU members and he opined that strong pressure from the AU is unlikely. He said that he personally doesn't understand "one can be hero when you kill your own people and precipitate the collapse of your country, but these are the hard facts we are facing in Zimbabwe."

¶9. (C) The Acting President further noted that Mugabe had threatened "to crush" any African leaders who oppose him, but Botswana was not intimidated. He said he had personally taken Mugabe to task at the summit in Egypt about the looming catastrophe in Zimbabwe to little effect. He offered a loose quote from Shakespeare, "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad."

¶10. (C) When asked about prospects for success at the November 9 summit, Foreign Minister Skelemani replied that "the odds are against it." Merafhe quietly added that though he considers himself an incurable optimist, "optimism has left him" on the prospects for a positive outcome at Sunday's summit.

NOLAN